

Resonant Earth

The Ceramic Sculpture of Halima Cassell

Article by Zachary Kingdon

IT IS NOT EASY TO PUT INTO WORDS THE EFFECT THAT Halima Cassell's remarkable ceramic sculptures have on you when you first encounter a well-displayed selection of her work. I can only describe it as being like entering a concert hall and being hit by a symphony of beautifully tuned instruments that fill the air with a unique and thrilling energy. For Cassell's works are sublime ceramic forms, carved with extraordinary precision and spatial imagination, whose playfully manipulated formal elements resonate with profound cultural references.

Cassell applies her imagination and clay carving techniques to elemental shapes, like semi-spheres, square plates and cylinders and dramatically transforms them into vessel and dish-like forms whose simple carved motifs appear to reverberate outwards from a central subcutaneous source to create a mesmerising effect with the overall design. In certain pieces the effect is visceral, as it is achieved through

the play of light and shadow over faceted patterns that have an unsettling ability to confuse the eye with their oscillating ridges and depths. Ridges and folds in the clay create layering and overlapping effects as the viewer's position changes; patterns of repeating concave motifs appear to switch between concave and convex states. The visual excitation that Cassell's works create in the viewer compels one to interrogate each piece and draws one into an interaction with them.

Cassell experimented only briefly with glazes, before deciding that the shallow oscillations of surface sheen and pigmentation were a distraction from the essential character of her material and from the life or 'personality' of her pieces. Her subsequent creations have depended solidly, for their character, upon the earthy hues, tones and textures of their heavily grogged, baked clay bodies. Cassell consciously seeks to create visual tensions and a sensation of movement in her pieces by playing with formal elements that

Top: REM. 2006. Unglazed clay. 18 in/d.

Below: Harlequin Shifts. 2005. Unglazed clay. 12 in/d.

Top: REM (View II).

Below: Harlequin Shifts (View II).



work against one another. She does this by carving juxtaposed segments of her designs in opposing directions, inward against outward, with the additional practical aim of avoiding the creation of potential weak points in her medium. Likewise, the interior and exterior design of her forms must work together, as in a harmonious piece of architecture, in order not to compromise the strength of the structure as a whole. Working with an intimate understanding of the behaviour of her various clay bodies, she pushes her medium to its limits as she invents new and more daring ways to balance the structural stresses created by her increasingly ambitious sculptural forms.

The story of how Cassell came to create these original and vibrant forms is interwoven with the dominant strands in the course of her life. In both her life and the development of her art she has followed unique trajectories. Although born in a village in Kashmir, Cassell was brought up in a conservative Pakistani community in Manchester. Her early interest in art was discouraged and as a result of various unfortunate circumstances, including the death of her mother (later on her father also died), Cassell was placed in care at the age of 12. Her family fragmented and her education suffered as she was transferred from one care institution to another until the age of 19. Yet in spite of her trauma and the hurdles hindering her from pursuing a career in art, her passion for artistic expression remained stronger than ever. At her school in Blackburn she was lucky enough to have an art teacher who encouraged her and provided her with the means to develop her creative talent. This helped her to win a place for herself on a foundation course in Art and Design at

Blackburn College in 1992, which was to be a turning point in her life and the first step towards the fulfilment of a previously impossible dream.

After two fulfilling years at Blackburn College, Cassell then moved on to do a BA in Three Dimensional Design at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston. Although initially interested in working in glass, she soon settled on ceramics and worked with organic and figurative forms while also pursuing her interests in drawing and surface pattern.

Cassell's traumatic early life left her, as a young woman, with a need to approach life and her work on her own terms. She began to develop her techniques and current way of working in 1996, during the second year of her course in Three Dimensional Design, when her work lost all figurative content and began to incorporate carved relief forms of the kind found in traditional Islamic art and architecture.

The change was triggered when she was set a project to create a work representing 'a situation or celebration of your life' and she chose to tackle the 'burning issue' in her mind. This issue was the lack of opportunity that she had experienced as a girl growing up in a conservative Pakistani community in Manchester. These feelings were aggravated by the difficulties she was facing at university, especially when it came to written work. She had to struggle with undiagnosed dyslexia and felt that she was not adequately encouraged or supported. For the execution of her project she hit upon the idea of creating a pair of contrasting clay figures, one squarely masculine and the other femininely pear-shaped. She then faced the problem of how she was going to infuse them with a sense of her cultural identity. Cassell's

Interlocking Vs. 2008. Bronze. 12 in/d.



Concentric Circle. 2008. Bronze. 12 in/d.



approach, whenever she was set a project, was to research it visually. She would take a new sketchbook and fill it with as much visual material on the topic as she could find. By copying images and designs that caught her eye, and by working these up alongside her own ideas, she built up a practical understanding of her topic through close observation and a kind of osmotic assimilation through performance. The completed sketchbook then served as the primary resource that she drew upon in tackling her set project. On this occasion she began working her way through books on Islamic art and found that she was particularly drawn to the deeply carved designs that adorned mosques and other Islamic buildings. She invented her own versions of designs that particularly interested her and it was these that she carved into her pair of clay figures. Her excitement at seeing how the figures were brought to life by the designs carved into them set her off on a new course, as she immediately grasped the creative potential of this new and transformative process.

She found that this new way of working was transformative at another level. Fellow students and other people started commenting on her work and told her that they were 'strong' or 'powerful' pieces, 'masculine' even. These responses helped to boost her confidence. Cassell's confidence was further boosted a few years later once she had moved on to do her MA in Design. Here she was able to work with local brick making companies and experiment with new tools, new ways of handling clay and with a variety of different clay bodies. She also mastered plaster model-making and mould-making techniques. She found that many of the methods used by these companies were ideal for working with the heavy structures she created, so she was able rapidly to consolidate and develop her creative techniques and style of working. Her new direction and way of working bore fruit when she was selected for two professional development schemes, including her solo exhibition *Carved Earth*, initiated by Shisha.

Islamic art and architecture was not the only creative influence on Cassell's work at that crucial point in 1996 that contributed to the strength and success of her future work. At the same time as she was set her 'situation or celebration' project in the second year of her BA degree, she had also been set a tableware design project, which she chose to develop on an African theme. While researching this project, again in her uniquely visual way, she had gained an understanding of the way particular types of African surface design were constructed and she began to apply this new understanding to her work. She was especially drawn to seemingly complex designs that were built up with elemental colour contrasts using simple motifs repeated in varying orientations. Her earlier works from this period were constructed using a triangular motif according to similar principles (for later works that also incorporate these principles see *REM*, *Whispering Gallery*, *Harlequin Shift*, *Castillian*, *Zygorat*, *Kirigami*, *Maltese Cross*). Cassell was also particularly intrigued by her observation that in certain African societies everyday utensils, textiles and even houses, appeared to be wrapped in a similar decorative skin composed of the same repetitive pattern. But to her perceptive eye, these bold, repetitive patterns were never static and this seemed to be because their basic motifs were repeated in various subtly different ways. For example, on a *Kuba* raffia textile from Central Africa (something that is typical of what first caught her interest), she noticed how even a motif as simple as a triangle, when rotated or repeatedly nested, created a dynamic sense of movement and depth. These were particular effects that she can most clearly be seen to have made use of in a work from 2003, which she considers to have an African feel, called *Interlocking Vs*. Following these principles, Cassell began to work with heavily grogged, semi-dry clay bodies on to which she mapped carefully proportioned geometrical patterns. But she then worked a new level of drama and complexity into the pattern as she carved into the clay, rotating and

Interlocking Vs. 2008. Bronze. 12 in/d.



Maelstrom. 2005. Unglazed clay. 12 in/d.



opposing motifs at different depths, expanding them outwards over convex bodies or gauging them in to the depths of concave forms.

Cassell considers the abstract patterns that she carves to be very personal creations inspired mostly by her moods, thoughts and memories, rather than by things she can see around her. But she also thinks of pattern as something that humanity has always used, a fact borne out by the occurrence of patterns like zigzags, chevrons, nested U-shapes and grids in ancient rock art sites throughout the world. These elementary patterns, and Cassell makes use of similar ones in her work, have a deep psychological foundation and are universal in the sense that they are spontaneously generated by the nervous system. It is very common for a people to see such patterns (described as 'phosphenes' by psychologists) when they first go into trance or when under the influence of hallucinatory drugs (not the case with Cassell). More generally, the brain's ability to generate, recognize and enjoy pattern is fundamental to the way that it interprets what the eye sees and to the way that it constructs a coherent world view. From this perspective many of Cassell's works can be seen to resonate with the primal products of the human psyche.

Works with titles like *Tsunami*, *Maelstrom* and *Basalt Shadows*, make allusion to elemental forces of nature but their forms seem to describe forces in harness, energetic and powerful yet beautifully composed. I view them as partly reflecting Cassell's own temperament, in which phenomenal energy is coupled with a remarkable equanimity. Cassell insists that to be where she is today, she would face again all of the obstacles that she had to overcome in her early years. Equally, however, the sense of balanced forces that animate her works can be seen partly to derive from her visual understanding of particular design principles that underpin much Islamic decorative art. Fareda Khan has compared the 'serene' balance of dynamic tensions in Cassell's work with Dalu Jones' observations on Islamic art, which he characterizes as: "...an art of repose, intellectual rather than

emotional, where tensions are resolved. It is a conceptual art where questions and answers are finely balanced. Absence of tension is achieved mainly through subtlety of surface decoration in which patterns are limited to well defined areas but are at the same time infinite in the sense that they have unlimited possibilities for extension. The principles are of repetition and the continuous permutation of motifs and designs. Like water itself, which plays such a unique role in Islamic architecture, the decoration continually reflects and multiplies patterns to provide a 'cool' refuge for the eye and mind..."

Now an established artist who works full-time in her studio, Cassell's work is sought after by public institutions and private collectors in the UK and further a-field. Residencies and projects awarded to her in Japan, South Korea and Pakistan have extended her creative horizons and she continually experiments with new materials, tools and techniques. She has cast numerous pieces into bronze and she recently began making works in stone and wood as well as plaster. Cassell has responded to recent commissions for public sculpture with practicality and intelligence, always applying her facility with geometry and her spatial imagination to create works of physical presence and visual impact. A recent commission for a sculpture trail in the Ribble Valley nature reserve in Lancashire, UK, resulted in a series of monumental studies of the flowers and fruiting bodies of common woodland plants. Constructed from individually sculpted and fired brick components glued with epoxy resin, each piece sits bold and compact on a carved plinth of the same materials, like an invitation to look more closely at the world and to discover the geometry to be found in nature.

As she extends her range, Cassell's work has become increasingly sophisticated. One of her latest works is her interactive sculpture *Sacred Conversation*, a group of six sculpted plinth seats that invite audiences to complete the work by perching on the twin buttock-shaped depressions on opposing sides of each piece. Each plinth seat accommodates

Basalt Shadows. 2005. Unglazed clay. 19 in/d.



Sacred Conversation.



two people seated back-to-back who provide each other with a sensuous backrest. The work constitutes a 'sacred conversation' of an unorthodox kind in which the interlocutors face away from each other and avoid the potentially anxious play of visual cues and expressions that influence face-to-face interaction. The six pieces constitute an architecture for a relaxed human interaction that references and invokes a phenomenology of bodies in contact, fitting comfortably against each other.

Many of Cassell's creations are especially effective when exhibited together. Each one seems to enliven the space around it and resonate, like a musical instrument, with its neighbours. They resonate on an intriguing visceral scale with fragmentary products of consciousness, memory and imagination – fragments, orchestrated in opposition and dialogue, at the same time individual and cultural, personal and universal, primordial and contemporary, spun, folded and teased into a whole within each work. Halima Cassell is constantly amazed at the unbelievable variety of responses to her works that she receives from visitors to her exhibitions. Yet this diversity is a function of their remarkable accessibility and humanity, because each person who views them is able to detect, reflected in their sublime yet

indefinable structures, the emerging products of his or her own mental processes.

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Above: Sacred Conversation.

Below left: Rubicon. 2007. Bronze. 28 in/h.

Below centre: Whispering Gallery. 2006. Clay. 12 in/d.

Below right: Rubicon (View II).

